District Six Museum’s Critical Pedagogy: Making Spaces to Heal Community Memories

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Abstract

Cape Town’s District Six Museum houses the memory of the 60,000 people forcibly removed from the area when the apartheid government of South Africa declared it for white use only in 1966, and razed it to the ground. Significantly, the museum has chosen to work with the memory of an eclectic and cosmopolitan community, which runs counter to an apartheid discourse that categorised groups along strict racial lines. The museum’s mandate is in line with former President Nelson Mandela’s vision of the inclusive South African rainbow nation that has confronted and reconciled its traumatic history. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed apartheid’s demise gives context for the museum’s emergence as it emphasized providing a space for victims to express painful memories that had previously been silenced by the state. Being able to vocalise one’s memories is considered an important part of an individual and South African national healing process.
This paper is concerned with how the District Six Museum gives space for expression of memories and engages in and facilitates this ongoing healing process. Crain Soudien (2006) and Anna Bohlin (1998) have started to explore the critical pedagogical techniques used by the museum to (re)construct memories in such a way that it can form narratives that are unconstrained by apartheid categories of race and so produce an inclusive, anti-racial body of knowledge and community. This paper will contribute further to this research by looking closely at the pedagogical techniques used by the museum in four specific exhibitions. The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, perpetrated along the perceived racial lines created by apartheid, highlight the currently incomplete process of healing South Africa’s memory. Thus, the District Six Museum has an ongoing role in providing spaces for dialogue that challenge a persisting discourse and memory centred on race.

Introduction

The District Six museum, located in Cape Town, South Africa, is committed to preserving the memory of a culturally and racially diverse community of 60,000 people that was forcibly removed from this space when the apartheid government declared the area “for white use” only in 1966 (Soudien, 2006). Over the following decades, the state’s bulldozers came in and razed District Six to the ground, leaving a scar on the urban landscape. The government’s idea was that if no tangible trace of District Six remained, its history would be forgotten. Yet, as a former resident points out, District Six may be “gone, buried, covered by the dust of defeat but there is nothing that memory cannot reach or touch or call back.” (Don Mattera, http://www.districtsix.co.za/frames.htm). The question that increasingly bothered former residents was not whether they could use the forces of memory to keep District Six alive, but how they could best house these memories to mobilise and recreate the community in the future.

The decision to construct a permanent museum as the manifestation of District Six’s memory was made possible by the demise of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Nelson Mandela’s victory in these elections inspired the country to believe in the possibility of a “rainbow nation” that could confront and reconcile its traumatic history. The subsequent idea of healing the past in post-apartheid South Africa took on a particular approach
embodied by the state sanctioned Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. By giving space for both victims and perpetrators to tell their stories, the Truth Commission was intended to restore memory and foster a new humanity based on understanding and ubuntu, a Southern African philosophical concept that we are people through other people, rather than a need for vengeance (Krog, 1999).

Like the Truth Commission, the museum seeks to excavate memories previously silenced by the dominant apartheid discourse; to create spaces that allow an alternative narrative of the past to develop; and to facilitate community healing and forgiveness through these. Translating this vision into practice posed a challenge for the Truth Commission and continues to be something that the District Six museum grapples with today. The museum has arguably achieved success in this mission through its exhibitions that enter the realm of critical pedagogy (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). As an implicated and participatory subject in the process of knowledge and identity production, the museum visitor comes to understand the relationship between knowledge and power and can take a critical view of authority that denies gaps, limits and counter-narratives (Giroux, 2005). The District Six museum uses critical pedagogical approaches to do this through its street sign installation, its alcoves, and its memory cloth and floor map exhibits.

However, I want to take a moment to consider the approaches that the museum has chosen not to employ. Most noticeable is the absence of overt violence in the exhibitions or an attempt to recreate the actual moment when the bulldozers moved into District Six, which is a departure from standard museum practice when curating difficult subject matter. In this way, the museum successfully avoids sensationalising the story of District Six, which carries the risk of casting visitors as voyeurs, rather than implicated subjects (Bonnell & Simon, 2006). The museum’s decision not to display violence has been described as its “curatorial coup” since it permits the exhibitions to focus instead on the familiarity of home and the tender memory of a community, which is in stark contrast to the lived violence of the township (Bharucha, 2007, p. 401). Critics argue, however, that the moment has arrived for the museum to explicitly (re)insert violence into the memory of District Six so that visitors cannot luxuriate in idealistic nostalgia (Bharucha, 2007). However, potential complications arise out of this approach since the museum risks visitors being drawn into a binary narrative of victim and perpetrator where it is easier to appropriate blame and consider violent acts the responsibility of a few. This runs counter to the museum’s discourse of constructing reconciled inclusive communities. Its current practice of inserting elements of suggested violence into the background of the museum, such as the bench inscribed with “whites only”, is critically pedagogical in forcing visitors to consider “the banality of evil” that facilitated the destruction of District Six (Bharucha, 2007, p. 403). In this context, the
visitor is less able to absolve themselves of responsibility as they construct meanings and identities.

Normally a museum’s institutional strength is its ability to produce more nuanced knowledge using its objects’ encoded histories, memories and cultures. The District Six Museum curators recognise this potential but the apartheid state’s determination to eradicate the memory of the community means the museum has few tangible remains to work with, which has led to them focusing on intangible heritage (Prosalendis et al., 2001). The collection of original street signs from the former District Six is an exception. Displaying them as a mobile, suspended in the museum’s atrium is a powerful memory tool. The name “Aspeling Street”, for example, evokes associations between former residents and the houses, meeting points, street vendors and performers that constituted this particular social environment. Reactions from former residents to the street signs prove that exhibiting them in this way is effective in provoking memory; one former resident explained how being able to touch particular signs makes memories of events that occurred in the street come alive again “like a little video recorder playing it over in [her] head” (Bohlin, 1998, p. 175).

By choosing to group the street signs together in this fashion, the visitor is presented with an impression of an ad hoc conglomerate of streets and buildings. This reflects the system of interwoven pedestrian pathways around which the former District Six developed. In this way, the exhibition draws on novelist and former resident Alex La Guma’s idea that through the act of walking and navigating District Six, residents made anonymous streets, corners and facades legible at the lived level (Jackson, 2003). Evoking memories of this method of meaning-making subtly encourages the visitor to replicate this process of walking and knowing so that they come to know the memory of District Six by similar means to the residents.

As well as providing a mnemonic link between the exhibition hall and the actual space of District Six, museum docents and interpreters (often former residents) draw visitors deeper into the story of the museum by telling the story of the museum’s acquisition of the signs through protracted negotiations with a member of the apartheid state’s demolition team who had collected the signs during the razing process and then stored them beneath his house, in spite of official orders to throw them into the ocean (Bohlin, 1998). That successful negotiations did take place is testament to the new spirit of forgiveness stirring in South Africa; victims and perpetrators could potentially come face to face and reach a new level of tolerance and understanding. This is the story of reconciliation that the interpreters tell with reference to the signs.

Interpreters also describe parallels between the collecting of District Six signs and the movement in Britain during the Blitz to collect and protect street signs in the event of a Nazi occupation. As well as anchoring this process in a broader
moral spectrum, the analogy is successful at implicating increasing numbers of Western visitors for whom the history of Nazi occupations and atrocities is likely more familiar than that of apartheid (Bohlin, 1998). Authorities on museum pedagogy agree that successful pedagogical techniques appeal to and build upon the visitor’s prior knowledge (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). The signs are one way that the museum can effectively make connections with this broader common knowledge.

Another affective exhibit is the display of personal photographs and domestic objects donated by former residents in the alcove areas around the atrium. The museum’s first director explains the role of those objects that enter the public sphere of social narrative as analogous to windows that offer glimpses of life into the District Six home (Proselandis et al., 2001). Exhibiting diminutive objects from difficult histories in spaces where the architecture obliges the visitor to move close to the artifact is an effective way to foster engagement with the objects. Its success stems from the paradox that by moving close to the artefact, the visitor acknowledges the precision of its form and their own distance from the specific histories embodied in the objects. Subsequently, this moment of proximity between visitor and object allows the visitor to “dwell” with the objects since they are divorced from a linear narrative in the museum (Bonnell and Simon, 2006). The opportunity to dwell allows the extraordinary events that the objects trace to resonate more closely with the visitor’s ordinary life, to become perceptible in their thoughts and behaviour and, subsequently, affect and alter the visitor’s way of being with others (Bonnell and Simon, 2006). In the case of District Six, the desired alternative way of being with others is based on tolerance, rather than the suspicion and mistrust engendered by apartheid.

The alcoves in the museum walls also exhibit the oral histories of former residents. Exposing the visitor to sound recordings immerses them in the experience and is particularly valuable as a pedagogical technique, since effective learning takes place when all our senses are engaged (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Visitors report how listening to the recorded words of former residents enhanced their “sense of loss for the people and anger towards apartheid” (Ballantyne, 2003, 282). As well as provoking emotional responses from listeners, this gives District Sixers (the term the museum uses to refer to former residents of District Six), a more egalitarian space to tell stories that were once silenced by colonial and apartheid discourses that assumed authority by virtue of being written.

Objects and recorded stories both evoke emotional responses so that the visitor can empathise with former residents. Emotion is a powerful tool and is an integral part of a learning process that facilitates divergent thinking (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). The ability to share and understand another person’s feelings creates the conditions for opening up spaces for tolerance.
and forgiveness. In seeking to create spaces for community healing the museum employs critical pedagogical techniques beyond empathy. One approach that relies on direct visitor engagement with the exhibit is explored in the calico memory cloth and floor map display (Soudien, 2006, p. 7). This critical pedagogical approach poses greater risk for the museum as the outcome is determined less by the mediator than the visitor who is required to interact with the exhibit in such a way that the exhibit is physically and permanently altered. The calico memory cloth, for example, is a space for District Sixers to write their names and so tangibly record a presence that the apartheid state had denied them (Soudien, 2006).

The floor map of the former District offers a potentially more complex and sophisticated forum for recovering memories than the calico cloth (Soudien, 2006). As a trope, the map is unsettling: it provides a comprehensive way for the visitor to know District Six but it is precisely this totalising ability to map out lived spaces that gave the apartheid bureaucracy the power to mark out the territory it would destroy and the community it would forcibly remove. The sense of assuming a Foucauldian panoptic view of District Six is physically enhanced by the visitor’s ability to view the entire map from the museum’s first floor balcony (Foucault, 1995). In making visible this complex relationship between power and knowledge production, the map is a particularly effective critical pedagogical tool.

Visitors interact with the map in several ways: people can simply walk across it, teenagers perform hip-hop on it, and land restitution hearings have been conducted on its surface (Miller, 2001). The most profound mode of interaction is by District Sixers who mark their former homes and places of importance on it. The visitor will find, however, that those spaces they wish to reoccupy on the map, as well as in their memories, may already be filled by someone else. This disrupts the sense of stability that the map’s boundaries and tangibility allude to. These confrontations force the visitor to suddenly take a wider view of the area and consider their relationship with people as well as place (Soudien, 2006). By prompting the visitor to acknowledge that their narrative of District Six is not the only one, the visitor must (re)consider and justify his/her own sense of identity that this experience undermines (Soudien, 2006). Alain Touraine (2000) argues persuasively that this undermining of identity is an essential starting point if we are to live together, rather than simply exist side by side in a state of indifference. The new South Africa strives for this idea of a community based on a common humanity where previously segregated people live and engage with one another (Krog, 1999). This is a high order but the experience of the map makes considering this idea possible (Soudien, 2006).

Critics who advocate the strength of this pedagogical approach with reference to District Sixers are convincing. But they engage less with wider notions of public inclusion and exclusion.
that arise out of the exhibit that could limit its effectiveness; the map has the potential to imagine the community only in terms of those who previously lived there and so have the moral right to mark or sign the map (Bohlin, 1998). The criteria for belonging are defined by the territoriality and memory of belonging to it. Other visitors must simply observe this process unfold before them.

Other critics argue, however, that this potential for exclusion is compensated for by with a more inclusive notion of belonging in the museum’s narrative that encompasses everyone who suffered under apartheid or is interested in learning about South Africa’s past (Bohlin, 1998). As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained at the Truth Commission hearings, everyone who lived under the apartheid regime was “wounded” since it made people lose their humanity (Krog, 1999). While visitors can seek reassurance in this broader sense of belonging, it also forces them to accept collective responsibility. The Truth Commission explicitly drew on Jurgen Habermas’ notion that although collective guilt does not exist, we do have a collective responsibility for a mental and cultural context that makes crimes against humanity possible (Krog, 1999). Developing as it does out of this discourse of collective guilt and forgiveness, the District Six Museum is able to communicate the idea that with the comfort of inclusion comes collective responsibility to ensure that similar atrocities are never repeated and never again allowed to tear communities apart.

To date, the District Six Museum has provided the space and means for survivors to record traumatic memories that have been silenced. Mr Sikwepere’s Truth Commission victim testament perfectly captures this sense that being able to vocalise one’s pain is essential for healing one’s memories:

I feel what ... has brought ... my eyesight back is to come back here to tell the story. But I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now ... it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story (Krog, 1999, p. 31).

The emotional responses that these memories evoke from visitors, both South African and international, allows the museum to use empathy as a powerful pedagogical tool. The underlying idea is that if we can experience the emotional memories of another, rather than possessing only the verbal knowledge to speak about the other’s experience, we are more likely to exercise tolerance and understanding in our behaviour with one another in the future (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). In apartheid South Africa, a discourse of fundamental difference and fear between races, emphasised by segregated living, precluded building relationships or inclusive communities based on tolerance and understanding.

Pedagogical approaches that move beyond empathy force the visitor to consider the sacrifices they might be required to make to accommodate others and achieve the lived reality of the rainbow.
nation. These might be as fundamental as questioning one’s identity and the legitimacy of one’s narrative as starting points for constructing communities in which people really live together. The map experience is an important starting point for moving in this direction (Soudien, 2006). While space for healing South African communities fractured along racial lines has been provided in the Truth Commission and District Six Museum, the process is far from complete. The recent xenophobic attacks in May 2008 that claimed more than sixty-two lives in South Africa are explained by the District Six museum as arising out of the racial conditions of apartheid. They fundamentally undermine the notion of an inclusive antiracist rainbow nation and illustrate the importance of continuing the type of memory healing that the museum is engaged in (http://www.districtsix.co.za/frames.htm).
References


